

TAKING A SECOND LOOK

Let me begin with the disclaimer that I do know there are few things as boring in life as having to listen to stories about someone else's vacation--except maybe having to look through all 400 of the pictures that they took while they were there.

Having confessed that, let me now proceed to tell you a story from a trip to the UK that Hue and I had some five or six years ago.

In understanding the scene here, you need to imagine yourself in Scotland, specifically in the grand old city of Edinburgh. Like many cities across the United Kingdom, there is a castle here to see. In Edinburgh, however, it's not just any castle. It is one of the grandest castles of them all, constructed on a perch of solid rock and set high above the old town.

It has such a commanding position that there is almost no place one can go on the surrounding streets where your eye is not hypnotically drawn to this castle high up on that prominent outcropping.

Lucky for us, the late afternoon this day in Edinburgh was what I call a "blue-sky day." (That's a good day for photography.) After all the grey and cloudy days that we had had on this trip--no unusual thing for this part of the world--finally here was one whose sunshine and bright blue skies would give me something to work with photo-wise.

Mesmerized by this most photogenic of castles, Hue and I set out on foot to walk the streets the whole way around it, so that I could photograph it from this angle, then from that angle, then in full sunshine, then in partial sunshine, with Hue in the foreground, then absent from the foreground, and so on and on. Judging by how my feet felt afterwards, we probably walked several miles in the interest of completing this circumambulation.

At one point, I stopped to take yet another snapshot, this one where the castle could be photographed in the near distance, as framed between two cherry trees that were in bloom on either side of me. It was a National Geographic shot. It was then that the moment in question occurred.

After the clicking of the shutter, I pulled my camera down and prepared to walk on, when I noticed another pedestrian coming in the opposite direction. What he did next surprised me: He looked at me, then turned his body around and looked back, over his shoulder, in the direction of what I had just photographed, as if to say, "What are you looking at? What did you just take a picture of? What do you see?"

From my side, my question to him would have been obvious: How could one be in Edinburgh and not throw at least a glance in the direction of that fabulous castle? In his defense, he was probably a local and, taking the scene completely for granted, and preoccupied instead with his own inner drama, simply didn't see it anymore.

Isn't that how it is with everything and everyone that we take for granted? We are so nose-to-the-grindstone, so distracted, so in-our-own-heads that we effectively remove ourselves from the living flow and the present grace of our own lives--in fact, blind to the beauty and the goodness and wonder that are there.

And with that, we segue into this morning's reading from John's gospel. Not coincidentally, it too concerns blindness, the diminished capacity to see what's there.

“Who sinned?” the disciples want to know of Jesus, “this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” (Jn 9.2). A curious question, to which is attached an equally curious pair of possibilities as the answer--neither of which is very satisfying. “Oh, this man is born blind because of his own sin.” (What sort of sin occurs before birth that deserves such punishment?) “Oh, this man is born blind because of his parents’ sin.” (What kind of a God would do that?)

Though Jesus’ does dodge the trap of choosing either of these disagreeable alternatives, his answer is no easier to grasp. He begins, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” Well, that’s a relief at least! In other words, his blindness is not a punishment for anyone’s bad deeds; there’s something else at stake here. What? Jesus continues, “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (9.3).

I’m not exactly sure what that means. The rest of the story, though, concerns how Jesus restores the man’s sight. So maybe it means that, whatever the circumstances, whenever true sight is restored, there is the evidence of God at work.

For certain, God prefers to have us seeing. Otherwise, there’s a lot that God is doing that is overlooked by us, a lot to which we are oblivious, a lot that is merely lost on us. Without a doubt, God wants us seeing clearly.

As I stopped to take a picture, a man turns around to see what I am looking at. It is a moment where the fog of busy, busy life clears away momentarily, and this fellow is able to see, as if for the first time, what I saw. It was worth waking up to take a second look. It usually is.

“Who sinned?” they want to know, “this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” Still a curious question.

“Who’s fault is it that this man cannot see?” they demand to know. “Who can be blamed for his blindness? Upon whom can we pin the responsibility for his lack of sightedness?”

Jesus’ answer suggests that assigning blame isn’t the thing. It doesn’t matter how it is that we have acquired the reduced or skewed capacity for seeing truly or seeing fully. What does matter is that we become aware of the fact of our diminishment and that we open ourselves to God’s restorative efforts--which requires that we address within ourselves any fundamental unwillingness to see--because there is always a part of us that wishes to remain blind. If there’s any of that there, even God’s best efforts will be in vain.

As for Hue and me, there were many other people who passed by us on that busy street that afternoon in Edinburgh, all the rest of whom just walked on by, never so much as changing their stride. It’s not in the cards, it seems, that everyone sees, but it’s ever so important that at least a few of us do.

So, that’s the story. Oh, and we do have pictures to look at, if you’re interested, but that’s not necessary . . . really.

What is necessary is that we grasp that what sets off the few from the many is the willingness, from time to time, well, to come to ourselves, to become conscious, to be turning around and taking a well-deserved second look.

What parts of your personal life deserve one of those?
What parts of our life together here merit one of those?

No doubt, it’s time to wash from our eyes, as it were, a certain obscuring mud.